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First Days, First Steps

Initiating a Culture of Thinking

 **H**aving spent most of my life as either a student or a teacher, I've come to mark my years according to the school calendar. For me, the official new year begins sometime between the last weeks of August and the first week of September just as the summer nights begin to cool and the days become noticeably shorter. Compared to the sense of ritual, freshness, and anticipation that mark the beginning of a new school calendar, January 1 seems a rather pale imitation of a year's beginning. I'll gladly forgo the champagne and midnight toasts in exchange for all the newness, anxiety, and expectation that accompany those first days of the school year.

For me, it is the sense of newness and possibility connected with the beginning of the school year that most excites. As a child, the need for new pencils, notebooks, and folders meant trips to the store and a seemingly endless number of choices to be made among the variety of consumer options presented. There was also the newness of textbooks and desks that, no matter how worn and used, nonetheless promised a fresh experience and opportunity. There was the newness of teachers, classmates, and seating charts that made it possible to

envision a new world inside the walls of the classroom. Amidst all this newness, anything could happen; one could even become a whole new person.

Tempering this excitement and enthusiasm were the feelings of anxiety that tend to accompany all beginnings but especially school beginnings. My first days of school usually were preceded by vivid dreams accentuating all of my anxieties and insecurities: of getting lost in a new building, of being late, of being singled out, of not being smart enough, and of being under the thumb of mean and crusty teachers. Of course, buried beneath these dreams were my hopes—and the hopes of every student, I believe—of being accepted, included, encouraged, and looked after. Although anxiety is heightened by newness, it quickly becomes tempered by the establishment of routines and the growing familiarity of surroundings. Thus, as the excitement of the new wears off, it is replaced by the comfort of the familiar with its own rewards and motivations.

Nestled within and closely associated with these feelings of newness and anxiety lay a sense of expectation: What will this class be like? What is to come? What will be required here? In opening the classroom door each fall, these are the questions all teachers must answer in the first days of school. Indeed, all teachers provide answers to these questions, whether they know it or not. They answer these questions in their introductions to the class, through the routines they establish, and in the way they allocate classroom time. Often, teachers answer these questions as much by what they leave unsaid and unattended to as by what they deliberately try to convey. Although the first days of school will always be a celebration of the new and an effort at lessening anxieties, these days are first and foremost an expression of expectations that set the direction and establish the norms for the rest of the year.

In this chapter, I examine how teachers go about answering the question of expectations for their students and, in doing so, lay the foundation for enculturating thinking dispositions and developing students' intellectual character. I present four practices, emerging from the collective work of the teachers I studied, that are particularly relevant to establishing a culture of thinking at the beginning of the school year:

- Conveying a sense of the history of thought and the power of ideas

- Jumping into a big subject-matter issue
- Laying a foundation for ongoing dialogue
- Setting an agenda of understanding

Although not a definitive list of effective beginning-of-the-year practices, these four practices highlight some of the ways in which teachers' actions during the first days of school can send positive messages about thinking and its importance in the life of the classroom. As discussed in Chapter Three, these expectations initially act as external stand-ins for students' own inclination toward thinking. Over the course of the year—through ongoing reinforcement, encouragement, and repetition—students gradually internalize these expectations.

My goal here is to paint a vivid and rich picture of each practice in action so that its spirit, intent, and nature can be easily reinterpreted and applied to new situations. To do this, I have selected examples that I feel are clearest and most robust. However, in presenting my findings in this way, a bit of the context of each teacher's experience and practice is necessarily lost. I regret this because I have come to know each of these individuals as engaging teachers who deserve to be celebrated and understood in their own right and not merely as a collection of disaggregated actions. My hope is that more of the full character and personality of each teacher will emerge over the course of the next few chapters and that readers will come to appreciate the individuality and intellectual character of each of these educators as much as I have.

CONVEYING A SENSE OF THE HISTORY OF THOUGHT AND THE POWER OF IDEAS

When students first step into a classroom, they receive a series of messages about the teacher's aesthetic, organizational abilities, interests, and attitudes toward teaching and learning. The first two of these qualities are readily discernible in the arrangement of the room, strategic placement of posters on the wall, provision of supplies, use of charts and checklists for keeping track of the various rituals of school life, and finally the state of the teacher's desk. But the last two of these qualities, the teacher's interests and attitude toward teaching and learning, may not be so apparent. To discern these qualities, we look as much for what is present as what is not. We look at the content of what is up on the wall, not just its arrangement. We also look at how

the physical environment of the classroom gets used and integrated into the instructional day. In this section, we look more closely at these components of the environment to better understand what a classroom that conveys an attitude and expectation of thinking actually looks like.

Questions and Quotes

Heather Woodcock's front chalkboard is ringed with messages strategically placed to engage students whose attention might be wandering. Mounted on construction paper above the chalkboard is a set of seven questions. These are big questions, universal questions, the kinds of questions that direct inquiry in the discipline, promote self-discovery, and speak to the human condition. These are Heather's guiding questions, designed to point the direction for her seventh graders' studies in humanities during the year. She has carefully crafted each question to capture the imagination, prompt discussion, and guide students' inquiry. Heather refers to these as her throughlines because they tie together all of her teaching in social studies and language arts throughout the year.¹ These seven questions are

- Why do people seek to discover what is unknown?
- How does learning about other cultures help us understand ourselves?
- What does it mean to "come of age," and how does it differ across culture, time, and gender?
- Can we all be individuals as equal parts of a whole?
- What keeps peoples of different cultures from living/working successfully together?
- How does reflection on your work and thinking help you understand?
- How do we find out the truth about things that happened long ago and far away? How do we see through bias?

While these questions outline the focus of the course, their posting serves to keep that focus alive in students' minds. With the questions so prominently displayed, students have the opportunity to ponder them at any moment.²

Heather also has other thinking aids posted around her room. On either side of the chalkboard, squeezed around a calendar and a homework sign-off station, is a series of quotes:

- A vision without action is a but a dream. Action without vision is a waste of time. But vision with action can change our lives.
—Greg Henry Quinn
- Live in the now, and never worry alone.—Anne Nash
- You'll regret the things you don't do in life more than the things you've done wrong.—Anonymous
- Five hundred years ago a person in error was a person searching for the truth.—John Leinhard
- At times inactivity is preferable to mindless functioning.
—Jenny Holzer

These quotes and many others scattered around the room speak to the mental life in some way or another. Whether they be about the relationship between thought and action, the need for taking risks both in life and in thinking, or the call for introspection and awareness, these quotes serve both to inspire and to link students with thinkers of the past.

One of Heather's first weekend homework assignments also cultivates a link with past thinkers, as well as introduces students to the power of well-crafted words to reveal insights. For the assignment, students find and copy a quote that they like and feel speaks to them. Students then share these quotes with the class and explain the reasoning behind their selections. These quotes are added to Heather's collection, and they find a home on the walls of her classroom.

The Walls Teach

As in Heather's room, the walls of Chris Elnicki's eighth-grade social studies classroom are designed to be vehicles of instruction. In one corner is a display of historical photographs chronicling the industrialization of the United States. Chris uses these pictures to teach students about making inferences, spotting bias, and noticing details. Adjacent to this set of pictures lies a series of laminated world maps that students use to trace their ancestry and learn about immigration. Around the corner, hidden behind the door, is a collection of political cartoons the students use to understand how serious public issues are often understood through analogy. Scattered throughout the room are posters that juxtapose what the Bill of Rights guarantees to U.S. citizens with pictures that show those rights being infringed on. Everywhere you

look, there are maps, flags, and globes, either hanging from the ceiling or tacked on the walls.

Intermingled with these teaching displays are an assortment of personal touches: a Jiminy Cricket doll atop the chalkboard and a collection of hats covering the top of a filing cabinet. Family pictures are tacked to the wall behind Chris's desk and beside them hang a series of Colorado license plates that he has collected over the years. And as in Heather's classroom, there are quotes. Above the windows hangs the banner, "A ship in port is safe, but that's not what ships are built for." Above the chalkboard are a set of directions for learning, "When you're searching for new information, be an explorer. When you're turning your resources into new ideas, be an artist. When you're evaluating the merits of an idea, be a judge. When you're carrying your idea into action, be a warrior." Next to Chris's desk, a small poster reads, "I'd rather know some of the questions than all of the answers."

Chris's displays serve much the same purpose as Heather's guiding questions. They provide a road map for the year. Acting as a kind of visual gestalt, these bulletin board displays convey to students the kinds of issues, topics, and ideas that are going to be important in this classroom throughout the year. These displays also provide glimpses into the issues, ideas, and thinking of others, revealing the importance of perspective taking and point of view. The quotes that Chris has chosen send important messages about expectations for students' thinking, emphasizing the importance of curiosity, risk taking, and ways of constructing meaning.

How This Practice Supports the Development of Intellectual Character

On the surface, the kinds of classrooms Heather and Chris have designed are not unusual; they have not turned their rooms into spaceships or replicas of the Mayflower. However, they have created places that send important messages about both the content to be investigated and the role that thinking plays in that endeavor, a practice that is not as common as one might hope. By establishing the norms and values of the classroom, these teachers' displays represent the first steps toward developing students' general inclination toward thinking.

In contrast, most classroom displays more typically convey messages of discipline, posting the class or school rules; rote learning, displaying steps and procedures; external authority, listing district or state

standards; or work motivation, inspiring messages designed to keep students going. Although these messages are not inappropriate or wrong, they do not necessarily serve an agenda of thinking and may unintentionally undermine it by promoting a "work" rather than a "learning" orientation toward the class (Marshall, 1987, 1988). A work or performance orientation is associated with a focus on obtaining external reinforcement or favorable evaluations for one's performance. Such environments focus on getting the work done, completing assignments, keeping busy, and collecting points or grades for that work. This kind of environment can become dangerous to learning when the nature of that work, its quality, and its significance are never questioned or seriously examined, when the focus becomes work for work's sake. I'll take up this issue of classroom orientations further in the last section of this chapter.

Unfortunately, more stark contrasts to the thinking-rich environment presented by Chris and Heather can also be found. I once visited a middle school classroom in which totally different messages about the importance and nature of thinking were being sent. I had come to administer an assessment of students' thinking. Walking into the room, I was struck by how barren it was. There was very little to catch the eye or spark the imagination. The exception was one poster positioned prominently in the center of the back wall. The poster was a picture of a large gorilla slumped over with its head down and eyes closed. The caption of the picture read, "Thinking makes me tired." While struck by the irony of administering an assessment of thinking in the presence of this rather disheartening sentiment about thinking, I couldn't help but wonder how this message influenced students' day-to-day actions in the class. When those responsible for engaging students intellectually view thinking as hard and boring work, it must be especially difficult for students to develop their inclination to use their thinking abilities well.

JUMPING INTO A BIG SUBJECT-MATTER ISSUE

In a sense, everything and nothing happens on the first day of school. It is possible to look at the first day as merely one of logistics and introductions: teachers pass out materials; they assign desks and lockers; and everyone puts names to faces. However, these tasks, as simple and mundane as they are, also teach. Beginning-of-the-year tasks and

how they are handled convey not only the teacher's organizational abilities and confidence but his or her values and priorities. Because these tasks are not givens but represent choices on the part of the teacher, they communicate to students the teacher's passions and perspective with regard to teaching and learning. However, a logistical start is not the only way to kick off the school year. In this section, we look at what a nonlogistical type of first-day introduction looks like and what messages teachers convey when they plunge students right in to a big subject-matter issue.

Unmasking the Rules of Mathematics

There is a distinct lack of formality as John Threlkeld prepares to begin the first algebra class of the school year. He quickly introduces himself for the benefit of those students who don't know him, then calls out students' names. As he says each name, he looks around the room to locate the student and then points to him or her. Many of the faces are familiar to him. Throughout this process, John appears a bit disorganized, says he is having trouble with names and faces, comments on not being able to find his overhead projector, and in general breaks just about every rule that many so-called experts dictate for an effective start of the school year. Matter-of-factly, John presents a problem culled from the newspaper—a puzzle in which you move only one digit in the false equality $62 - 63 = 1$ in order to make it true. Without much discussion, he says that the problem is “out there.” “There's something for you to ponder. Something interesting to think about,” he remarks. He encourages students to bring in other interesting problems for the class, noting that this one was given to him just today by a student. He tells students that he likes problems such as these and that, over the course of the year, they will find him to be an eccentric and unabashed geek.

In this brief exchange, John has set the tone. While he appears to be disorganized and rather lax in attending to details, he also comes across as affable, good-natured, trusting, and approachable. Perhaps more importantly, he gives the impression of being on top of the content, eager to pursue mathematics with students, and ready to push their thinking. John finds mathematics engaging, and he becomes animated just talking about a problem. His passion comes through loud and clear. It also is clear that he is in charge of the class and not a slave to the textbook, which he never mentions during the hour.

John tells the class that he would like to begin with a problem from *The Phantom Tollbooth*—a book by Norton Juster that many of the students remember reading in sixth grade. John flashes a page of the book on the overhead projector and reads it quickly. In the story, the main character, Milo, explains how mathematics can make things disappear and, by way of example, presents the following problem:

$$4 + 9 - 2 \times 16 + 1 + 3 \times 6 - 67 + 8 \times 2 - 3 + 26 - 1 + 34 + 3 + 7 + 2 - 5 =$$

Upon seeing the problem, another character, described as always first to shout out a wrong answer, says the answer is seventeen. John asks if anyone in the class is like that. A few giggles and John adds, “Don't ever be afraid to give a wrong answer. Never be afraid to give a wrong answer that you have thought about.” Returning to the problem, John asks the class, “What does this equal? Work in pairs to come up with an answer.” Under his breath, he adds, “I suppose that I should figure this out myself” and heads to the board.

After a few minutes, John calls out, “I want to hear what you got.”

A student says that she may be wrong.

John says he doesn't care; he wants to hear it: “I really am quite serious. I want you to tell me what you get. Yeah, the bottom line is that one is right and one is wrong, at least in algebra, but I want you to try out your ideas and not be the least hesitant to say, ‘Here is what I got.’ And by the way, maybe we're all wrong.” He writes down her solution and then quickly puts other answers up on the board. There are soon as many answers as student pairs.

Before delving into a discussion of the problem, John interjects, “I might as well add my answer to the list as well.” A few students moan, and John adds, “Not that it's right but because I think it's wrong.” In this gesture, John both joins the community of learners as a coparticipant and ratifies the task as an authentic problem, one in which the teacher does not secretly know the answer. John comments that most of the answers are different but hastens to add, “Math is not a democracy, and whatever gets the most votes doesn't win. There has to be a proven answer.”

John leads the class in working through the arithmetic of the problem together, and immediately there is a discussion of order of operations, a topic the class has already recognized as the key to the problem. John reviews the mnemonic device, PEMDAS, used for remembering order of operations and recounts the first time he was

introduced to this now familiar memory tool, thus placing himself once again in the role of a learner. Before long, students have discovered their various errors, and a communal answer begins to emerge as $-47\frac{143}{238}$.

Students begin to use their calculators to check their answers, but rather than getting confirmation, a new confusion arises as students get different answers. John uses this confusion to introduce the main point of the class, "It is interesting to notice something. Someone programmed your calculator. We have at least a dozen different kinds of calculators in here, and almost all did the same thing. Did they have to do that?" The students quickly shake their heads in disagreement, and John continues, "Mathematicians have generally adopted this agreement among themselves, scientists too, about what is meant by order of operations. If not, what would happen?"

"You'd get different answers," a student volunteers.

"Right, so there is a general agreement. In math, it is pretty important that two people doing the same problem can arrive at the same answer, so we have order of operations. We talked about those rules. What were they?" As students shout out the rules, John writes on the board: "Parentheses, Exponents, Multiplication and Division, and then Addition and Subtraction, PEMDAS."

Pausing and turning to the class, John asks quietly, "Who thought of those rules? Why all that instead of doing it Milo's way, from left to right?" There is silence, and then John begins again, "I don't know the answer to that. I don't know the answer to that, and I haven't been able to find out. But I have some places that I might look. I think that at some time in the evolution of math, Milo's way was right. . . . Could we do it another way? Could we do things in a different order?"

A student volunteers a tentative answer, "Well, it depends. If we could get everyone to agree."

"OK, it's called a grassroots effort," John adds as he expands on the student's idea. "We would have to convince others that our way is better, or we could treat ourselves as a closed society. The real point here is that that set of rules is an incredibly arbitrary thing. What does *arbitrary* mean?"

"No good reason for it," a student volunteers.

John quickly adds, "That's right. *Arbitrary* means that it doesn't really matter as long as everybody agrees on it."

From the side of the room, a student offers his evaluation of the order of operations rule: "I think that parentheses have to come first

because that is the only reason to have them. It just gets too confusing otherwise."

John writes the student's assertion on the board and adds to the class, "Think about what he is saying."

The student continues with his argument, "Well, if you had another rule, like do multiplication first, and you had the problem . . . well, something like, $2 + 4 (6 + 4 \times 2)$. If multiplication had to come first, you'd be confused because you're supposed to multiply 4 times the quantity $6 + 4 \times 2$, but you don't know what that is."

"Think about what he is saying," John reiterates. "His declaration was, hypothetically, multiplication first, but unless you know what *this* is, what do you do? You've got two multiplications, but which one do you do first and how? You see the dilemma, I hope. I've thought about this, and I don't see any way around having parentheses first."

Another student chimes in, "I think that parentheses only exist because we have order of operations. You wouldn't need them otherwise. That's the whole point."

"Yeah," a girl sitting in the back row adds, "they just group things for you. Like, sometimes you need to think of a group of numbers going together. If you look back at the original problem, there weren't actually any parentheses, but you could put them in to show how you grouped the operations in your head."

Still another student enters the debate, "Well, what about exponents? It seems like exponents could come first."

John tosses the student's comments back to the group, "Let's think about that. It's a good question." He then writes " $2 + 4 (6 + 4 \times 2)^3$ " and asks, "How would you do that?"

The student examines the problem and gathers her thoughts, "Oh, I guess you would still have to do the parentheses first or just not have them at all."

Another student picks up on this point and brings the conversation back around to the main point, "But the argument is why have order of operations at all, why not just go left to right and forget about parentheses?"

"Just do it Milo's way, you mean?" John clarifies and then begins to sum up the discussion, "Great stuff. You're all causing me to think about this more. I'll have to go home and see what I can come up with. That was good stuff. What I am going to ask you to do tonight is to go home and play with this some more. One of the things that you are going to play with is this kind of idea about order of operations. Instead

of PEMDAS, why not PESMAD? What you are going to be doing tonight is experiment with different configurations of order of operations to see what you come up with. This was a great class. I love these kinds of discussions."

Learning About Perspective

For Susan McCray's seventh graders, humanities class is a new experience. Not only is the course title new and unfamiliar, but for many, this is their first multi-age class in which they work alongside eighth graders. For this reason, Susan uses the first day to introduce students both to each other and to the course as a whole. After a brief introduction in which students interview and introduce each other, Susan asks for an eighth-grade student to explain what humanities is all about.

A student volunteers, "It's a mix of social studies and English. Last year, we learned about the Holocaust and discrimination."

"I like how you captured the essence," Susan responds, then turns to the rest of the class, "What other kinds of work do we do in humanities?" Several students raise their hands and talk about the different kinds of projects, performances, and response journals they did last year. As Susan elaborates on each of these and begins to tell the class what new topics they will focus on this year, another teacher quietly enters the room and goes to Susan's desk. Susan continues her explanation but glances frequently at the teacher in the back of the room who is now rummaging through desk drawers. Susan stops for a moment and asks the teacher, "Can I help you?"

"No," the teacher responds, "I'm just looking for that book that I gave you."

Susan goes back to her explanations, keeping one eye on the visitor in the back of the room. She starts to explain that this year they will be exploring issues around immigration but then pauses and once again directs her attention to the teacher in the back of the room, "Can I help you out?"

"No, I'm all set. I just wanted to get the book. Dave [the principal] told me to come up and get it," the woman cheerfully replies as she continues to go through stacks of papers on Susan's desk.

A bit ruffled, Susan responds more firmly, "But I told you that I have the book. It's my book, . . . and I'm trying to teach class." Sensing Susan's growing tenseness, the class begins to follow the exchange

between the two teachers more closely. Heads move back and forth between Susan at the front of the room and the other teacher in the back.

Matter-of-factly, the other teacher stops going through the desk and responds to Susan, "Yeah, I know, but Dave told me to come and get it. He gave the book to me, so . . ."

In a firm but calm tone, Susan tries to put an end to the interruption, "OK, I'd rather you not look through my desk. I'd really rather you . . . We can talk about this later."

Politely and cheerfully, the teacher heads for the door and answers Susan, "OK, no problem. Dave told me to come and get it."

With obvious displeasure, Susan responds, "Well, this has been ongoing, and we really need to work it out. But I'd rather not get into it now." The fellow teacher, still in a calm manner, responds as she exits, "OK, we can talk about it later."

With the interruption over, Susan returns to her discussion of course themes and projects but quickly stops herself. "I'm sorry. I'm distracted. This has just been an ongoing thing. I hate to pull you all into this, but what did you all just see?"

A few students eagerly volunteer, "You mean like she just totally ignored you and went through your desk!" Another student offers, "You want me to check and see if she stole anything?"

Susan shares with the students her dilemma around the incident and asks for their help, "I need to bring this up with Dave, and I don't want to have just my account. Would you all do me a favor? It would really help me out if you could just jot down what it was that you saw." After a pause, she adds, "I guess this is appropriate. I mean, it is humanities class, and we do a lot of different kinds of writing in humanities."

Students quickly get to work and ask Susan a variety of questions that show their engagement in and concern about the incident: "Do you really not like her?" "What's her name?" "Is it really your book or hers?" "How long have you been fighting?" "Is she going to get in trouble?"

A few students, sensing a setup, ask, "Did you plan this?"

Susan responds that she knows it sounds weird, but she could really use their help on this.

As the students begin to finish their writing, Susan asks if anyone would be willing to share what they saw. Most of the accounts are brief, but several students have picked up an amazing amount of detail. Susan remarks on how helpful the details are to figuring out what really happened. As students share, Susan points out some of the differences in the accounts: how the other teacher was characterized,

what details were noticed, and what some people saw as fact and some saw as more ambiguous.

At the end of the discussion, a student asks, "Why did you want us to write it down?"

At this point, Susan admits that the whole incident was indeed set up. A few students are completely surprised, whereas others smile at the confirmation of what they suspected. Susan asks the students why they think she did this and what the activity might have to do with humanities.

A few students venture a guess, "Well, it was descriptive writing," one student offers.

Susan confirms this aspect of the activity and adds, "And that involves being able to look closely."

Another student offers a more down-to-earth explanation, "You wanted to teach us not to go near your desk."

Susan laughs and acknowledges that that's a reason she hadn't thought about but that the incident might have had that effect.

Susan then explains her rationale to the class: "This was a more interesting way of introducing you to what humanities is all about. Part of it is developing good observation skills: being aware of what is going on around you, being able to really describe that, to document it, but then also to be conscious of the perspective you bring to things. It seemed in this situation that you all pretty much decided that she was doing something she shouldn't do. Why do you have that perspective?"

Students offer various explanations: "Because you were yelling at her to get out of your desk." "Because you're our teacher." "Because you put it into our heads."

"How did I do that?" Susan asks.

The student elaborates by reading from his account, "When you said, 'This has been an ongoing thing, and you don't like it,' that made us think she was a bad person, that she kept doing this."

Susan picks up on this, "What else would you need to know to really analyze this situation to figure out who was right or wrong? What would you want to know?"

Several students respond in chorus, "Her side."

With this, Susan launches into a more complete explanation of the activity's purpose,

A big piece of this activity is how much we need to always be conscious of perspective, about whose side we are seeing. History is really people's stories. It is things that happen. It is events like this. This is now

a piece of history. It is an event that happened, and the history is how people choose to record those events. We all recorded those events differently. And if she had had a group of her friends here, they might have recorded it differently than we would. So we need to be conscious of the perspective of people who are writing our history. One of the things I want you to be aware of is what is going on around you, to be critical thinkers. I want you to be willing to look at a situation, a text or a piece of writing, and look at it critically. To dig deeply into trying to understand it and understand the different perspectives represented there and the different perspectives represented in this room. We need to talk those things out. What were you thinking and why? That is what this little scenario represents.

How This Practice Supports the Development of Intellectual Character

Both John's and Susan's classes are a big departure from the way most teachers begin the school year. Instead of the usual review of rules and procedures, both teachers jump right into the middle of big subject-matter issues. For John, it is: Where does knowledge and truth come from in mathematics? What is the source of the mathematical rules we learn? For Susan, it is: How does perspective shape history and our personal understanding of events? By starting class this way, teachers give students not just a sense of what the course will cover but how the course will actually feel and how they will go about their learning.

These first-day introductions sensitize students to important subject-matter issues and ways of thinking. Susan was sensitizing students to an awareness of perspective, encouraging them to look for different sides of the story. John was sensitizing his students to the need to look beyond the surface of mathematical rules in order to develop a better understanding of and mastery over those rules. By asking his students to examine the sense of order of operations, John helps them to see that some mathematical rules are merely conventions, whereas others have a deeper basis in logical reasoning.

LAYING A FOUNDATION FOR ONGOING DIALOGUE

In addition to expectations about content and the types of thinking demanded, first days of school also establish norms of interaction

between students and teachers. In these first moments, students learn how they are expected to participate in class. Is this a place where participation is limited to doing the homework, or is this a place that encourages expression of one's ideas and thinking? Is this a place where answers are shared and smartness assessed by one's contributions, or is this a place where ideas are explored? The questions teachers ask, the way they acknowledge responses, on whom they call, who is allowed to speak to whom, and when students are permitted to talk all send messages about the nature of participation and dialogue in a particular classroom. In this section, we look at how teachers encourage class dialogue that promotes full participation and supports learning and thinking.

Building a Climate of Respect

As Doug Tucker knows, encouraging a dialogue about ideas with and among students is seldom as simple as providing them the opportunity to do so. He also knows that his students face special challenges in creating and sustaining a classroom dialogue about ideas. His students' major experience of math classrooms is dominated by memory work and messages that participation means having the right answer or completing one's work quietly and on time. In addition, discipline and order have long been a major concern and focus of the faculty and administration at Doug's school. The result is that the school now exudes a sense of constant watchfulness and attention to student behavior. Staff members diligently enforce dress, language, and behavioral codes, giving the school an orderly and work-oriented feel. Although such discipline is critical to learning and reflects the dedication of the school to confront past disciplinary issues, the challenge now is maintaining order while loosening control and creating a more relaxed and comfortable climate.

The challenge Doug faces in creating and sustaining intellectual dialogue becomes fully evident the first week of school as he gives his students a warm-up problem to work on as they enter class. Not a routine type of problem, it is one that they must think about and consider carefully. They cannot simply apply an algorithmic procedure. As Doug notices the blank looks on students' faces, he tells them that they may talk about the problem with their neighbors. No one does. When Doug asks a few minutes later if anyone has a solution and is

again treated to blank stares, he once again suggests that students talk about the problem. Still, the class remains silent.

It is not just that the warm-up problem is hard or that students have little experience in solving this type of problem; it is also that students are unfamiliar with how to have an open-ended, exploratory conversation. Most of their classroom conversations have been confirmatory, taking the form of sharing and confirming answers, or they have been monologues, stating one's position or opinion on a topic. Students' lack of experience in this area is compounded by the fact that an open-ended dialogue of this sort involves taking an intellectual risk in stating one's confusion or in putting forth ideas that might very well be wrong. Doug sets out early in the year to confront these challenges: his first step is establishing a relaxed and friendly climate of respect.³

"Let's talk about expectations," Doug says to his students the first day of class. "The number one thing is this is a safe classroom. What does that mean?"

Several students offer explanations based on safety: no fighting, no horseplay, and so on. Doug continues to push until one student, whom Doug has had before in summer school, says that it means that no one should feel bad for asking questions. Doug acknowledges the student's contribution and asks the rest of the class to think about what that means in practice, adding, "Does that mean you can call someone stupid?"

Collectively, the class responds with a series of giggles and echoes of "No."

Doug elaborates on this point to make sure that students understand its importance. "If you do say that, I will be forced to stop class and give you a five-minute lecture. It goes like this." Doug launches into an explanation of peer pressure, the effects of that pressure on inhibiting students, and the importance of not disrespecting anyone. He ends this by smiling slyly and saying, "There is only one person in the room who is allowed to tease," as he points at himself.

Students fill in the missing word, "You."

Doug adds, "And there is only one person you can make fun of."

A bit more tentatively this time, the class once again says, "You."

With a deadpan delivery, Doug completes his sentence, "And that is Theresa." The class breaks into uproarious laughter, and Doug breaks out into a big grin. He winks at Theresa, a student he also knows from summer school, to confirm the joke.

The class clearly appreciates the joke, and it helps to temper the sometimes hard edge of the first day and the serious statements of expectations. The remark also humanizes Doug and helps to establish a mutuality in the classroom. Doug sums up the discussion by saying, "Seriously, I laugh at myself occasionally, but don't make this an unsafe place for anyone."

A popular student asks, "How can you laugh at yourself? Do you look in the mirror or something and start laughing?"

Assuming the false bravado of a kid picking a fight, Doug responds in mock seriousness, "Are you calling me ugly?" Again, the class erupts in laughter, and Doug attempts to answer the student's question more seriously, "If I do something funny, I'll laugh. I know it is hard for you to understand. I was a teenager once or twice myself. As a teenager, I know it is sometimes hard to look at yourself and laugh at something you did that was silly. But you will learn you will have more fun in life if you learn to laugh at yourself." Doug caps off the discussion, which has been laced with humor and goodwill, by returning to his main point: "But this has to be a safe room. We can laugh and have fun, but if it's not safe, no education is going to happen."

In this first-day discussion, it is not just the word *safety* that students hear. They also hear a message of mutuality and respect, and they feel the beginnings of a relationship being forged between the teacher and themselves. Within this context, students begin to feel safe to be themselves and to put forth their ideas. Doug continues to build this context over time by using humor, as well as storytelling and other means, to draw out students' ideas and encourage dialogue.

Structuring the Conversation

As students enter Chris Elnicki's room on the first day of class, he informs them that they have a task to do. On the front board, under the heading "First Things" is an assignment: "Look around the room and try to figure out what you can tell about me." While students glance about, Chris quickly takes roll then asks, "OK, what did you figure out about me or questions you have about me based on the room?"

Students raise their hands and begin to call out their findings. As they do, Chris presses them to explain the basis for their conclusions, to provide some evidence and explanation for their thinking.

One student offers the observation, "You're patriotic."

"What makes you think I am patriotic? What is the evidence?" Chris asks.

Pointing around the room, the student responds, "The flag, those posters."

Chris gently pushes the student's thinking by offering an alternative explanation, "OK, so I might be patriotic, or this may be a course that tries to teach patriotism. You can probably bet that an American studies course wouldn't be anti-American."

Another student, picking up on the expectation to provide evidence, points to a quote about the ship in the port hanging above the window—"A ship in port is safe, but that's not what ships are built for"—and observes, "You want us to be determined."

Chris acknowledges the evidence and the accuracy of the student's inference, "OK, there are a lot of quotes on the wall that deal with that. I like people to take risks. I don't want you to be a ship in the port."

Yet another student comments, "You have a sense of humor," and Chris returns to the expectation of evidence, asking the student, "Why?"

The student mentions the cartoons in the back of the room.

Chris elaborates, "OK, those are political cartoons, and we are going to be learning how to make sense of those. Anyone can identify the events in a political cartoon, but being able to interpret it and make sense takes some work."

As this exchange of observations backed up with evidence continues, Chris encourages the students in a new direction: "What can you tell about me? Am I married? Do I have kids?"

"Yes," a student responds, then cites the evidence, "Those pictures over there."

"Well, I might just be good at drawing pictures of tall girls and cats," Chris counters.

"Your wedding band," offers another student with a sense of pride.

In just a few short minutes, Chris has managed to get his students to do the work of introducing him, the curriculum, and the instructional focus of the year. He also has engaged them as thinkers and active participants by tapping into the natural inferential thinking everyone does within the first few minutes of entering a new space. However, this activity is not about first impressions so much as it is about making inferences based on evidence, a distinction that Chris wants students to make. Throughout this exchange, Chris establishes

his expectations for participation and sets norms for sharing ideas. He also provides a structure for the kinds of dialogues he wants students to have in his class. In addition, the episode cues and enhances students' inclination toward inferential thinking while pointing to the kinds of occasions when it is important to be sensitive to one's own impressions and aware of other points of view or possibilities.

Chris builds on this introduction and reinforces the dialogue structure he has established by asking students to analyze some photographs. He walks students through a five-step process with one of the pictures on the back wall. Step one is for students to note their first reactions or impressions. Chris warns that the process can't stop there, that these impressions are often connected to feelings, and it is important to go beyond this emotional response. The next step is to collect data, to try and see what is actually there. Then, at the heart of the process are the next two steps, to draw inferences and generalizations about what is going on based on the evidence and one's prior knowledge. Finally, students are asked to make a conclusion, to tell what they learned.

Chris hands out pictures documenting child labor conditions and informs the class that examining these pictures is a first step in answering the other question on the board, "Why are you here?" For the next seven minutes, students look at and discuss a single photo with a partner, using the structure Chris has laid out. This structure then becomes the basis for short presentations from each group. Through this opening activity, Chris not only jumps into a big subject-matter issue—How do we know what we know in history?—but he has established a structure that students will use throughout the year for talking about ideas in history.

How This Practice Supports the Development of Intellectual Character

Thinking is largely an internal process. However, we reinforce and in some cases acquire patterns, approaches, styles, and types of thinking through social interaction and participation. Classroom dialogue provides models of thinking that students can appropriate and gradually incorporate into their personal repertoires. When these norms of dialogue are sustained in classrooms over time, they provide students the opportunities to try on different types of thinking and practice them in a supportive environment. Barbara Rogoff (1990) describes this

process as an apprenticeship in thinking. The power of apprenticeships is that one learns in context. Thus, not only does one cultivate abilities but the expectations of the situation cultivate inclination, and through the authentic work, one becomes sensitive to occasions. In this way, patterns of thinking are enculturated.

These social dialogues also expose students to the language of thinking, the actual words used to describe thinking processes, products, states, and stances. This language not only serves a communicative function, allowing students to express their ideas and thoughts more effectively but also provides tools for regulating and shaping thought. As Shari Tishman and David Perkins (1997, p. 371) explain, "The words we have available to us influence the way we think about the world, including the inner world of our own mental life." In this way, the language of thinking provides a tool for students' own thinking about thinking, or metacognition. In Chapter Seven, we will further explore the role of language in cuing or prompting an awareness of opportunities for thinking and thus the activation of dispositional behavior.

SETTING AN AGENDA OF UNDERSTANDING

We might group the activities of setting up the physical classroom environment, conducting the first day of class, and encouraging dialogue under the general heading of agenda setting. These introductory practices are important precisely because they help to establish the classroom agenda by telling students what to expect and sensitizing them to the important issues and questions of the course. These initial actions communicate what teachers value most and are striving to accomplish with their students. Although it is clearly the teacher's agenda being communicated, that agenda can seek to involve and engage students actively. Through their actions, teachers can communicate that they value students as contributors and shapers of a joint classroom agenda.

By its very nature, a culture of thinking has to be tied to the establishment of an agenda of understanding. After all, thinking doesn't occur in a vacuum. You have to have something to think about, a purpose or a goal that will cause you to engage your thinking abilities. Likewise, understanding cannot be developed without thinking. I am not talking here about the loose kind of "getting it" understanding that

is so often the target of school instruction; this might be better referred to as having a superficial knowledge about a given topic. Rather, I am talking about the kind of understanding that is robust and that implicates personalized sense-making and a building up of connections, applications, and associations. Such understanding is performance oriented, marked by a use of associated knowledge and skills in novel situations. Developing such understanding necessarily means digging below the surface and thinking deeply about the meaning and implications of the ideas in question.

You might suppose that an agenda of understanding is the *de facto* agenda of all classrooms. Unfortunately, this isn't the case. Hermine Marshall (1988) has observed that classrooms have specific orientations: learning, work, or work avoidance. In a learning-oriented classroom, the goal is to develop an understanding of the course topics. In such classrooms, the work is purposeful and directed at making sense. A work orientation focuses on completing the work of the course. You can think of this as the mentality of getting it done or covering the material. Such classrooms are driven by completing assignments and moving on to the next task. In such settings, there is an implicit assumption that doing the work will in and of itself produce the learning, which, when the goal is skill development and consolidation, can happen. However, in work-oriented classrooms, both teachers and students tend to lose sight of the larger goals of education, allowing the means to become ends in themselves. Finally, a work-avoidance orientation leads students to see how much work they can avoid doing, often resulting from the teacher's inconsistency and lack of clear instructional goals. This game of subterfuge becomes the agenda of the class. A less sinister version of this orientation can be found in classrooms where there is an unwritten compromise in which, in exchange for the teacher's not pushing too hard or asking too much, students agree to remain generally complacent and compliant.

Of course, students bring their own motivations and orientations toward school with them as well. Some may be more oriented to learning, whereas others are intent on either completing or avoiding the work. However, these basic orientations are often fostered by past school experiences, and teachers can do a lot to bend students to their will by setting and sustaining their own well-focused agenda. In this final section, we look at how, in addition to the practices mentioned in the previous sections, teachers set an agenda of understanding early in the school year.

Focusing on Guiding Questions

On the third day of school, Heather Woodcock directs her students to the seven guiding questions (see p. 58) posted above the chalkboard: "I mentioned these the other day, and I called them throughlines. What these questions are are questions we are going to return to throughout the year. All of these questions can be connected in many, many ways to what we are studying in here and to our day-to-day lives. They can be connected to history, to literature, science, and math in a lot of different ways."

Heather tells her students that she doesn't want to say any more about the questions until they have thought about them. She informs students that for the next fifteen minutes they will select a question to write about: "What I want you to start doing today is to start thinking about one of these questions. . . . The important thing in thinking about these questions is to think, to explore, and to dig deeply into them and find out more than just one answer to them. Figure out what are the different possibilities for each of these questions." To help students select a question to explore, Heather encourages students to "choose a question that interests you obviously. Don't choose one that doesn't intrigue you, and I am not expecting all of these to intrigue you. Choose the one that you think has the most depth and the most richness for you."

Before students get to work, Heather explains more about the role the questions will play in the class's studies this year, "We will go back to these questions throughout the year, and probably each of you will become a specialist in at least one of them. As the year goes on, you all will see how they connect to our studies and to the literature we are reading. But for now, I don't want you to worry about it. For now, what I want you to do is to think about how you connect or think about any one of those questions."

For the next fifteen minutes, students write their thoughts on a sheet of paper Heather has passed out just for this purpose. Occasionally, they have questions, and a few students want to be sure they are completing the assignment correctly.

One student asks Heather to read hers with the explanation, "I'm not sure if this is off the subject?"

Heather offers her assurance, suggesting, "What you want to do with these questions is let them move you in different directions. You might examine that for a while and then move to something else." To

the rest of the class, Heather adds, "In answering the question you have chosen, you may want to ask more questions. That is always a part of figuring something out. Asking more questions, going further."

After fifteen minutes, Heather stops the class. "It's OK if you didn't quite finish up what you had to say. In fact, I hope you have more that you could say. . . . I'm curious what you all came up with and what direction you took these questions. Jennifer, what question did you select?"

Jennifer tells the class that she wrote about the first question, "Why do people seek to discover what is unknown?" A number of other students in the class have also selected this question, and a rapid-fire discussion ensues in which students share their thinking. Jennifer shares what initially prompted her to select the question, "Well, because if no one ever sought out new things and what they didn't know, then the world would never change. Things would just stay the same. You wouldn't have cures for sickness or anything."

Heather responds to Jennifer's take on the question, then encourages responses from others, "OK, so you are looking at outcomes. What about other people who thought about that one. Why do you think people do it? Why? What drives them. Sam?"

"If people didn't discover the unknown, then it would be boring. But discovering makes it more interesting," Sam offers.

Heather challenges Sam's response and pushes his thinking, "OK, but that takes work. Wouldn't it just be easier to sit back and not do anything, to just relax and enjoy life and not go through the bother. Wouldn't life be easier?"

Another student picks up the challenge, "But I think it is human nature to challenge yourself. And to go beyond what is there. It is just that people get things out of challenging themselves."

Heather reframes the student's response, "So you think what drives it is human nature?" The discussion moves into the role of curiosity: how it develops, how it is sustained, and what things might kill it. One student offers the observation that curiosity helped humans to evolve. Heather remarks that the role of curiosity will come up in their studies, "That's going to be very interesting as we think about the Renaissance. We'll be looking at how things changed so quickly and why."

The discussion continues for most of the period. At the end of the hour, as Heather collects students' writing, she tells the class, "You will

be returning to the question you selected and to the other ones throughout this year. We'll keep thinking and writing about them."

How This Practice Supports the Development of Intellectual Character

By setting an agenda of understanding, teachers communicate an expectation of thinking that helps foster students' inclination toward thinking. A focus on understanding also encourages them to monitor their understanding, a metacognitive process. In addition, understanding tends to highlight and directly pull into play various types of thinking dispositions, such as

- Curiosity: What's this all about? What's behind this?
- Open-mindedness and perspective taking: What's another way of looking at this?
- Being skeptical and intellectually careful: What's the evidence for this? How might my understanding be wrong?

When students and the teacher know that the class will be about more than memory work, these types of thinking more naturally find their place in the day-to-day business of the classroom.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FIRST DAYS OF SCHOOL

The four practices I introduced in this chapter were the following: (1) conveying a sense of the history of thought and the power of ideas, (2) jumping into a big subject-matter issue, (3) laying a foundation for ongoing dialogue, and (4) setting an agenda of understanding. These represent a set of effective tools and approaches that teachers use in establishing a culture of thinking. However, the specifics of each practice is ultimately less important than its intent. All four practices help develop students' inclinations to use their thinking abilities by establishing clear expectations for thinking.

Although the four elements of dispositional behavior that we discussed in Chapter Three—ability, inclination, awareness, and motivation—interact in a dynamic way and cannot always be addressed separately in instruction, teachers aiming to build students' intellectual

character tend to focus early in the school year on developing students' inclinations to think. These expectations for thinking provide a foundation on which teachers can build throughout the year.

It is a truism of education that the best predictor of how the school year will progress in any particular classroom is the first week of school. Although this adage has its basis in school effectiveness research, a program of research focused primarily on issues of classroom management conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, it seems particularly apt to the creation of a culture of thinking that supports the development of students' intellectual character. Although such a culture must be built up over time and reinforced day by day, teachers must lay claim to it during the first days of the school year. Day one is the time when expectations for social and intellectual behavior are set and when students assess the orientation of the classroom toward learning and work. It is also the time when trust is built, mutual respect is established, routines and structures for learning are introduced, and initial patterns of thinking emerge.

Because the culture of the classroom has not yet been established, virtually every action a teacher takes during the first days of school sends messages about expectations and values, which will in turn influence the development of students' inclination. Consider the simple act of giving a quiz. When John Threlkeld gives his students their first quiz of the year, it contains just four questions to be completed in twenty minutes. In contrast, the first quiz given by Karen, a teacher I observed whose classroom has a well-developed work orientation, comes from the textbook and contains eleven questions. Most of the class completes these questions in just five minutes. The point here is not that John allows more time per question but that the questions he gives require more time and thought to complete. The structure of John's quiz contains an expectation of thinking versus memorizing. Thus, the choice of what to ask on a quiz not only provides students with a chance to exercise their thinking abilities, it conveys an expectation that they do so. The feedback provided to students on the quiz also sends messages about what is valued and what gets counted. To the extent that the teacher attends to students' thinking rather than to their memorization of answers, he or she further reinforces the message that thinking matters.

As all travelers know, it is much easier to begin one's trip pointed in the right direction than to make a major correction later in the

journey. It is worth noting that in each of the teaching examples I have shared, the course each teacher worked to set was shaped by introspection about the kind of classroom each wanted to have and the patterns of thinking and interaction each wanted to elicit from students. This map of the ideal classroom culture then guided each teacher in his or her choice of how to begin the school year. In Part Three of this book, we look more closely at each teacher's introspection to understand how values and beliefs shape teaching.

In the intervening chapters, we examine ways that teachers build on and sustain the culture of thinking they have worked to establish during the first weeks of school as they go about the task of developing students' intellectual character. Our examination loosely maps on to the key dimensions of dispositional development—developing ability, nurturing inclination and motivation, and cuing awareness—while highlighting key instructional practices evident in these thoughtful classrooms.